CHEAP TRUTH

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HOW THE OTHER HALF READS

14. Russia's science-fiction picture shows these space men

THE DAY LASTS MORE THAN A HUNDRED YEARS by Chingis Aitmatov, translator John French, Indiana University Press, 1983.

People in the Soviet Union still have a 19th-century allegiance to the printed word. Authors are major public figures. Poets recite to packed soccer stadiums. Classic works of Russian literature are available, and their lack of Marxist ballast makes them seem vividly energetic and relevant. In the Soviet Union you can be a 'literary intellectual,' and no one will grin and ask you what you <u>really</u> do. You can get a license for it, and join the Writers' Union, and the State will pay you a salary.

Chingis Aitmatov, a Kirghis national born in 1928, is a highly prominent, established Soviet literateur. He's been a member of the Supreme Soviet, a winner of the Lenin Prize for literature, a Hero of Socialist Labor, an editor of NOVY MIR, an official correspondent for PRAVDA. His Marxist-Leninist credentials are impeccable.

And he is wildly popular. He is considered one of the most gifted authors of the post-Stalinist generation, not only by Party hacks but by the 'liberal' intelligentsia. When a writer like Aitmatov turns to science fiction, it behooves us to notice.

THE DAY LASTS MORE THAN A HUNDRED YEARS, published in 1980 to vast acclaim, is a remarkable, revealing piece of work. We should make it clear at once that it is terrible science fiction. Aitmatov has not escaped the condescension typical of mainstream writers who dabble in the field. In fact the SF element has been grafted into the narrative for ideological reasons, which is remarkable in itself.

The predominant movement in Brezhnev-era Soviet fiction was the 'village novel,' simple, small-scale narratives of rural life, drenched with pre-Revolutionary nostalgia. Through this device it was possible to dodge the crippling load of Marxist relevance demanded of State writers.

In the early '80's, literary ideologues decided that enough was enough and demanded that Soviet writers produce large works on a "global scope." Aitmatov has used wide-screen SF techniques to combine the popular 'village' narrative with the new requirements.

Strangely, although its traditional SF elements are abominable -- ludicrous blue-haired aliens, moons and planets whizzing by at the speed of light -- Aitmatov's novel does have a genuine SF feel. For it is about technology and its impact on human life.

The hero is a Kazakh Central Asian railroad worker. He lives in a godforsaken steppe railway junction with a handful of sturdy peasants. For decades he and his friend have tended the snorting machines, living a harsh, isolated life, not without dignity, but without much decadent fun. The book opens with the friend's death.

The Kazakh hero stubbornly decides to give his friend a traditional Kazakh Moslem burial, a rite worthy of a 'true steppe cavalier.' But technical progress has invaded everything. He has given his life to the railroad. A large rocket-complex has been built across the steppe, and its great rumbling launches light the sky. What is left to our hero? What is the meaning of his tribal traditions and memories? Has he thrown away his life, or does it all mean something, was the sacrifice worth it? These issues are handled with great skill and deep ambiguity.

At the same time, a large and somewhat bogus SF counterplot rumbles along in parallel. The novel is set in the near future, in which aliens have been contacted, through Soviet-American cooperation in space.

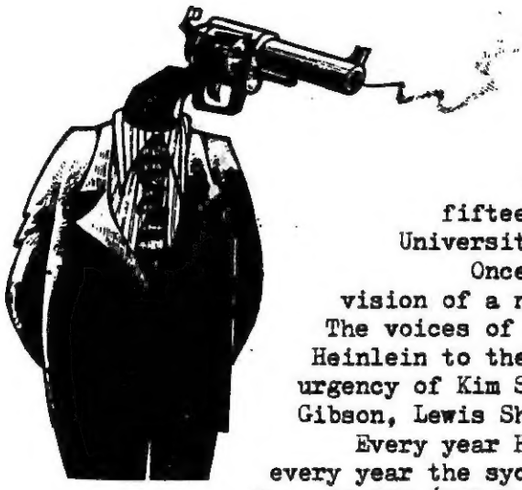
Here is another remarkable aspect of the book: its utter lack of hostility toward the West. This space effort is administered in friendly unison by Yanks and Soviets, from an aircraft carrier in the Pacific. (This ship is in itself a powerful image of hope for the Soviet audience. They have no aircraft carriers and see them as fearful symbols of aggressive capitalism.)

These aliens are blissful, socially-advanced superbeings of a vaguely Marxist derivation. They are of vast power and supernal wisdom. Are we to join them, or stick mulishly to our human heritage and its faults?

This question roughly parallels the first theme. Aitmatov attempts to give the events in the remote railway junction a cosmic resonance. If he fails, it is because his SF concepts are essentially ridiculous. And because, in the last analysis, his book has the painful, disjointed feel of a work designed by committee.

Yet it remains engrossing. Its flinching view of delicate political issues, such as the Stalinist purges, has a hot-potato daring. Its allusions are subtle and its scenes memorable. And there's no red-flag-waving, sunset-riding agitprop trash here; but hard issues faced by a brave man who is in too deep to back out.

This book was written in a straitjacket of sorts, and it shows it. Yet this much must be admitted: Aitmatov's book speaks to us in the West with force and relevance. Would our glittery, escapist tripe translate half so well?



CHEAP TRUTH radical Sue Denim seizes the Dean's Office and issues her list of demands:

SON OF KENT STATE

The 1985 Nebula Awards will be handed out on May 4, fifteen years to the day from the shootings at Kent State University in Ohio.

Once again the armed might of conservatism faces the radical vision of a new generation, this time across the distance of a ballot. The voices of repression range from the senile babblings of Robert Heinlein to the California vapidity of Larry Niven to the moist-eyed urgency of Kim Stanley Robinson; arrayed against them are William Gibson, Lewis Shiner, and Jack Dann. Can they prevail?

Every year Heinlein cranks out another volume of brain-dead maunderings; every year the sycophants cry "Heinlein is back!"; every year they lie. Even if JOB (Del Rey, $16.95) were a good book, or even a readable book, which I assure you it is not, why would anyone want to give this man a Nebula award? Plenty do, and it's for the same reasone they gave Henry Fonda an Oscar for a movie as wretched as ON GOLDEN POND -- because he was no longer dangerous.

Larry Niven is dangerous, but in a socially approved way -- much like, for instance, an armed National Guardsman at a student riot. "War would be a hopeful sign..." he muses in his latest perfunctory effort, THE INTEGRAL TREES (Del Rey, $3.50). It's touted as "his best since RINGWORLD!" by Heinlein fans everywhere. Even if it were, and it certainly isn't as good as RINGWORLD, is that qualification enough for a Nebula? Should we encourage this sort of thoughtless, derivative work?

As for Kim Stanley Robinson, his overwrought, reactionary, and anti-visionary WILD SHORE (Ace, $2.95) has already been dissected at these hands (CHEAP TRUTH 5). Suffice to say that Robinson's relative youth has nothing to do with his literary politics -- keep in mind that the Guardsmen that pulled the triggers at Kent State were no older than their victims.

But things are not so grim as they might sound. For once, the radicals are not outnumbered -- they match the villains man to man. (And men, you may have noticed, they all are. Where are the visionary women? Why don't we have novels this year from Leigh Kennedy or Pat Cadigan or Pat Murphy? Ask Ron Busch. Ask Terry Carr. Ask everyone you see.)

You've already heard about Gibson's NEUROMANCER (Ace, $2.95), and if you've got any sense you've already read it. This book had half again as many recommendations as its closest competitor to get on the preliminary Nebula ballot, and its brilliant depiction of a credible future has appealled to the sense of wonder in even the most hardened of intellects.

Yet it is also a victory that the other two novels made it to the ballot at all. Shiner's FRONTERA (Baen, $2.95) comes with conscious literary intent (allusions to Lowry, Dick, and Conrad) and decent, stylish prose; its flaws -- a couple of characters left hanging, a technological holy grail that is too powerful for the plot -- are forgiveable in a first novel.

Dann's MAN WHO MELTED (Bluejay, $14.95) took years to find a publisher willing to print it, and no wonder. The raw alienness of his future, with its eerie religions, baffling technologies, and sensual onslaughts, is not for the timid; it's the sort of book a lot of people would rather shoot than listen to.

And these are not the only victories. For once, there is no Connie Willis on the ballot. Bruce Sterling has a story up, Michael Swanwick has two, and Lucius Shepard three; two of the short stories, Shepard's "Salvador" and Zebrowski's "Eichmann Variations" are blatantly offensive and full of dangerously free thought.

Political oppression breeds revolution. For every Heinlein that smites a Gibson, thousands more will rise in his place. The SF revolution is crying out for literacy, imagination, and humanity; it needs only a victory in the Nebulas to shatter the giant's terracotta feet. Up against the wall, Heinlein!

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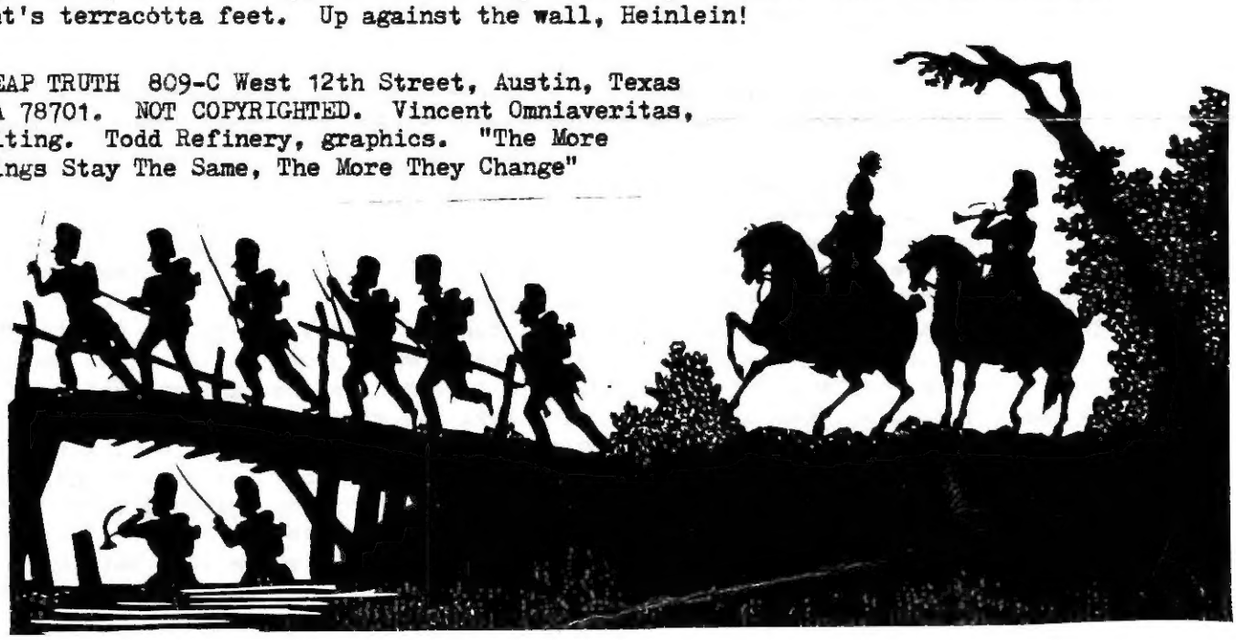

BULLETIN: CHEAP TRUTH Goes Silicon!

M O R E T R O U B L E

SMOF-BBS, "the world's first on-line SF fanzine," hit the wires on January 26, 1985. Operating on T-Net Version 2.0 telecommunications software, SMOF-BBS is up around the clock and is accessible at 300 baud through modems anywhere on the planet. Plug in and call 512-UFO-SMOF.

S E R V I N G S F T H R U S A M I Z D A T A

CHEAP TRUTH issues 1-10 have been placed on special files within the system. And, as always, CHEAP TRUTH is Not Copyrighted. It can now be read from the screen, or downloaded and printed out at home. And for the first time, CHEAP TRUTH has a letters column.

Excerpts from letters received at CHEAP TRUTH CENTRAL will henceforth be entered into Section 3 of the system. There they'll merge with comments typed in over phone lines from remote locations. This electronic lettercol will be periodically printed out, xeroxed, and mailed to CHEAP TRUTH conspirators. Together we will destroy the artificial boundary between wire and print.

U S E I T -- O R B E U S E D B Y I T

From INTERZONE 8: "Some would argue that the new electronic gadgetry is displacing the printed word -- if so, writers should fight back, using guerilla tactics as necessary and infiltrating the territory of the enemy." We ask devotees of print everywhere to battle alongside us in our guerilla invasion. Computer bulletin boards are a prose medium, requiring the same talent, vision, and dedication that prose requires in magazines, newspapers, books. The bottleneck, as always, is in imagination. Help us make the hardware worthwhile.

Those of you with word processors are aware of the sudden leaping power that computers can give. In SMOF-BBS, we hope to give a similar quantum leap in ease and distribution -- to the fanzine.

We have boards open for criticism, comment, and exchange of data, on topics ranging throughout the SF spectrum, from comics and video through Japanese animation and simulations gaming.

We hope to make SMOF-BBS a library, a fanzine, a databank, and an on-going convention by wire -- all simultaneously. We have 24 megabytes of empty storage -- 300,000 words of potential. Help us fulfill it.

CHEAP TRUTH will continue to operate in parallel through our established underground network of xerox pirates and the international mails. If you received this notice, you are on our Interactive Videofiles and will receive future issues without warning. Call SMOF-BBS for back issues or request printouts from your local cyberhead. And write our new Lettercolumn -- preferably in chunks of a hundred 80-column lines or less.

We have received many letters in the past, and we thank all those concerned. From now on, comments sent us may be offered free of copyright to anyone with a phone and a modem. Get ready.

CHEAP TRUTH On-Line, (512)-836-7663. 809-C West 12th Street, Austin, Texas 78701 USA. Vincent Omniaveritas, editing. Shiva the Destroyer, systems operation. "The Literary Equivalent of Free Software"